

Talking With Youth About Sex and Relationships

Most parents want to do their best in talking with their kids about sex and sexuality, but we're often not sure how to begin. Here's our advice:

Explore your own attitudes Studies show that kids who feel they can talk with their parents about sex -- because their moms and dads speak openly and listen carefully to them -- are less likely to engage in high-risk behavior as teens than kids who do not feel they can talk with their parents about the subject. So explore your feelings about sex. If you are very uncomfortable with the subject, read some books and discuss your feelings with a trusted friend, relative, physician, or clergy member. The more you examine the subject, the more confident you'll feel discussing it.

Even if you can't quite overcome your discomfort, don't worry about admitting it to your kids. It's okay to say something like, "You know, I'm uncomfortable talking about sex because my parents never talked with me about it. But I want us to be able to talk about anything -- including sex -- so please come to me if you have any questions. And if I don't know the answer, I'll find out."

Start early Teaching your children about sex demands a gentle, continuous flow of information that should begin as early as possible -- for instance, when teaching your toddler where his nose and toes are, include "this is your penis" or "this is your vagina" in your talks. As your child grows, you can continue her education by adding more materials gradually until she understands the subject well.

Take the initiative If your child hasn't started asking questions about sex, look for a good opportunity to bring it up. Say, for instance, the mother of an 8-year-old's best friend is pregnant. You can say, "Did you notice that David's mommy's tummy is getting bigger? That's because she has a baby inside her"--then let the conversation move from there.

Talk about more than the "Birds and the Bees" While our children need to know the biological facts about sex, they also need to understand that sexual relationships involve caring, concern and responsibility. By discussing the emotional aspect of a sexual relationship with your child, she will be better informed to make decisions later on and to resist peer pressure. If your child is a pre-teen, you need to include some message about the responsibilities and consequences of sexual activity. Conversations with 11 and 12-year-olds, for example, should include talks about unwanted pregnancy and how they can protect themselves.

One aspect that many parents overlook when discussing sex with their child is dating. As opposed to movies, where two people meet and later end up in bed together, in real life there is time to get to know each other -- time to hold hands, go bowling, see a movie, or just talk. Children need to know that this is an important part of a caring relationship.

Give accurate, age-appropriate information Talk about sex in a way that fits the age and stage of your child. If your 8-year-old asks why boys and girls change so much physically as they grow, you can say something like, "The body has special chemicals called hormones that tell it whether to become a boy or a girl. A boy has a penis and testicles, and when he grows older

his voice gets lower and he gets more hair on his body. A girl has a vulva and vagina, and when she gets older she grows breasts and her hips grow rounder."

Anticipate the next stage of development Children can get frightened and confused by the sudden changes their bodies begin to go through as they reach puberty. To help stop any anxiety, talk with your kids not only about their current stage of development but about the next stage, too. An 8-year-old girl is old enough to learn about menstruation, just as a boy that age is ready to learn how his body will change.

Communicate your values It's our responsibility to let our children know our values about sex. Although they may not adopt these values as they mature, at least they'll be aware of them as they struggle to figure out how they feel and want to behave.

Talk with your child of the opposite sex Some parents feel uncomfortable talking with their child about topics like sex if the youngster is of the opposite gender. While that's certainly understandable, don't let it become an excuse to close off conversation. If you're a single mother of a son, for example, you can turn to books to help guide you or ask your doctor for some advice on how to bring up the topic with your child. You could also recruit an uncle or other close male friend or relative to discuss the subject with your child, provided there is already good, open communication between them. If there are two parents in the household, it might feel less awkward to have the dad talk with the boy and the mom with the girl. That's not a hard and fast rule, though. If you're comfortable talking with either sons or daughters, go right ahead. Just make sure that gender differences don't make subjects like sex taboo.

Relax Don't worry about knowing all the answers to your children's questions; what you know is a lot less important than how you respond. If you can convey the message that no subject, including sex, is forbidden in your home, you'll be doing just fine.

Source:

Talking With Kids About Tough Issues

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